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# Swimming Ahead or Treading Water? Disaggregating the Career Trajectories of Women Self-Initiated Expatriates

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**This paper explores the career choices and trajectories of women self-initiated expatriates (SIEs). Extant research on these issues has tended to view women expatriates as a coherent group. We used a qualitative approach, involving semi-structured interviews with 51 women SIEs, to examine women's reasons to relocate, reasons for employment, past and current work as part of their overall career and future career plans. Drawing on literature on career theories, gender work segregation theory and women expatriates, we explore how national and individual factors affect women SIEs' career choices and career trajectories. In providing a more nuanced discussion of the careers of women SIEs, our key findings are that women's careers differ according to national grouping and marital status, with life stages and happenstance playing a more important role in women's careers than a planned career path.**

## Introduction

Most of the substantial research on women expatriates has focused on Western women, examining barriers to their expatriation and cross-cultural adjustment challenges when on international assignments (Hutchings and Michailova, 2017; Salamin and Hanappi, 2014). Research has considered differences in women expatriates' choices and experiences dependent on whether they were assigned expatriates (AEs) or self-initiated expatriates (SIEs),<sup>1</sup> with the latter more likely to be involved in self-employment or in the not-for-profit sectors (McNulty, Vance and Fisher, 2017). Moreover, women SIEs relocate primarily for adventure or personal development (Harrison and Michailova, 2014; Myers, Inkson and Pringle,

2017; Thorn, 2009), or career reasons (Myers and Pringle, 2005; Tharenou, 2010). However, little of this research has addressed the context of an overall career path (Myers and Pringle, 2005; Traavik and Richardson, 2010).

We explore career choices and trajectories<sup>2</sup> of sales, clerical, professional, managerial and self-employed women SIEs working in the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Though earlier research focused on business expatriates (McNulty and Brewster, 2017), a large number of expatriates undertake lower-status work (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017), so we include women from a range of occupations and incomes. We specifically examine: their reasons for relocation; their reasons for work/selection of employment; how their current work in the UAE fits within their overall careers; and how current work aligns with

<sup>1</sup>AEs are posted overseas by an organization for a fixed period of time; SIEs voluntarily choose to live and work outside their home country for a temporary period of time (Suutari and Brewster, 2000).

<sup>2</sup>Career trajectory refers to the path an individual's career takes: upwards/advancement, backwards or remaining constant.

their planned future careers. Our primary research question is: *What factors affect the career trajectories of women SIEs in the UAE?* We highlight the importance of national and individual factors in shaping women's career choices and trajectories, particularly examining the effect of national groupings and marital status, life stages and happenstance.

SIEs have been treated predominantly as a 'homogenous entity', with arguments for greater understanding of gender differences and the impact of host country location on outcomes (Suutari, Brewster and Dickmann, 2018). Women may find it easier to gain a job abroad than to be assigned to one (Vance and McNulty, 2014). They are a significant proportion of SIEs (Tharenou, 2010), and expatriation may be part of long-term careers (Suutari *et al.*, 2018). Our research investigates whether SIE women of diverse national groupings and marital status have differing career trajectories.

Through interviews with women SIEs, the paper utilizes grounded theory building, which involves inducting insights from field-based research. We chose this methodology because there is limited extant theory examining the phenomenon and, as such, this approach is useful in generating novel insights (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The UAE was selected as a site of analysis because of its large and varied expatriate population. Located on the Arabian Peninsula in the Middle East, the UAE is of significant economic importance, given its large oil reserves and heavy investment in tourism, construction, financial services, education and healthcare. Many of the world's largest multinational enterprises (MNEs) have regional offices in the UAE, and it is the home of many expatriates: senior executives and technical specialists, as well as low-skilled expatriates doing manual work in construction and service industries (Haak-Saheem and Brewster, 2017). These supplement the shortage of labour among local Emiratis, who comprise just 12% of the population (CIA, 2018). Despite this, Islamic cultural values play a pivotal role in shaping the society. For instance, unmarried couples cannot, by law, live in the same household and no resident visas are issued for unmarried partners or their children (Haak-Saheem, 2016). Moreover, a woman can sponsor her husband and children if she holds a residence permit stating she is an engineer, teacher, doctor, nurse or any other profession related to the medical sector and her monthly

salary is not less than AED 10,000, or AED 8,000 plus accommodation. In Dubai, if a woman is not employed in one of these categories, she may still be able to sponsor her family if her monthly salary is more than AED 10,000, with special permission from the respective authorities. A single mother can sponsor her child but might be asked to provide documents similar to those required to sponsor stepchildren (UAE, 2020). Given the cultural values of the society, the same requirements are not imposed on men, who would be expected to support a wife or children.

The limited research on women expatriates in the UAE has focused mostly on Westerners, with some research suggesting foreign women have different roles from local women (Harrison and Michailova, 2012; Hutchings, Michailova and Harrison, 2013; Stalker and Mavin, 2011). Expatriate women's identity is linked to how they live and work (Rodriguez and Ridgway, 2018), and they often have responsibility to ensure family members' adaptation to new jobs, schools and cultures (Kemp and Rickett, 2017). Recent research distinguished between SIEs who wanted to develop their career capital and financial position, and those who wanted to experience the culture (Tahir and Savara, 2019).

Research on differences between men and women in their career trajectories deflects scholarly attention away from examining career trajectory variability among women pursuing international careers (Kosseck, Su and Wu, 2017). Women SIEs are not a homogenous group, so we disaggregate the assumption that women's careers are similar, to identify the categorical factors that impact women SIEs' career choices and trajectories. We draw on specific aspects of careers theory, work gender segregation theory and studies of women expatriates. Careers theory argues that as people increasingly work in varying organizations and occupations, careers are shaped by life stages and happenstance (Pringle and McCulloch Dixon, 2003). Gender segregation theory identifies how women's caring responsibilities during different life stages affect their careers (Melamed, 1995). We bring these theories together to conceptualize how women SIEs' careers are affected by life stages and unplanned happenstance. We provide a theoretical contribution to SIE literature by suggesting, in addition to host country context, that women's own demographic characteristics, namely their national cultural background and married/single status,

affect their careers. Studying women from a wide range of nationalities, we highlight differences between women from the region who have higher levels of cultural fit and women from outside the region, and conceptualize how nationality and relationship status affects their career choices and trajectories. We present a model of disaggregated career trajectories through retrospective, present and future career views.

The paper takes the following form. First, we explore the relevant literature. Second, we present our methodology, using semi-structured interviews. Third, we present the findings. Fourth, in our discussion, we demonstrate our contributions to the extant literature by providing a more nuanced analysis of the career experiences of women SIEs. Finally, we conclude with implications for theory and practice and issues for future research.

## Literature review

We first explore women's careers, briefly tracing historical organizational, individual and national factors and gender segregation, and then consider women expatriates' careers and women SIEs' careers specifically.

### *Careers theory*

Rapid changes in the world of work have challenged traditional conceptualizations of career and career development (McMahon, 2002). Career development has shifted from being the responsibility of employers to the responsibility of the individual, with a concomitant shift from a focus on careers in one organization to careers in many (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996). While the concept of 'boundaryless careers' has been subject to some critique (Inkson *et al.*, 2012; Rodrigues and Guest, 2010), it is particularly suited to expatriate careers (Andresen, Biemann and Pattie, 2015; Stahl, Miller and Tung, 2002). Makkonen (2016) found that SIEs had three different career self-management approaches: labour market entry, focused on establishing a career in a specific field; employability maintenance, focused on ensuring employability between jobs or during labour market fluctuations; and career advancement. When SIEs did not achieve their expectations, they responded by adjusting their approach (Makkonen, 2016).

These theoretical developments have coincided with the emergence of theory suggesting careers are shaped by life stages (Pringle and McCulloch Dixon, 2003). Super (1990) described a process of exploration, establishment, maintenance and decline (though suggesting that these stages may not be linear and may iterate within an overall context of career progression). Relationships are important in women's identity, and the struggle between agency and communion is central to their careers – while some life stages are age-related, women's careers may not fit into a linear, deterministic model, because work, study and family can occur throughout life (Pringle and McCulloch Dixon, 2003). Women are most likely to need to balance relational demands in the middle of their careers, and may move to a greater career focus later (Sullivan and Mainiero, 2007). Because of these many planned and unplanned learning experiences, the career destiny of individuals cannot be predicted in advance (Krumboltz, 2009; Krumboltz, Foley and Cotter, 2013).

### *Gender segregation: organizational, individual and national factors*

Gender theorists have suggested that women's work opportunities and career advancement are affected by a range of organizational, individual and national factors. Women's choices are shaped by contextual factors, with 'opting-out' and 'pushed-out' views of bias, career preference and work-family narratives (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017). Early in their careers, women believe they can compete on similar terms to men; they expect similar treatment, equality of opportunity and to be recognized on merit (Broadbridge and Simpson, 2011). However, they experience both horizontal segregation (women only being chosen for some types of jobs/occupations, thus creating occupational divisions; Chung, 2019) and vertical segregation (the under-representation of women in management and constraints on their advancement through organizational hierarchies; Longarela, 2017).

Individual factors also affect women's careers and choices, including family responsibilities (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020), most notably during life stages such as child-rearing and elder-care, since women continue to be responsible for household work

and caring (ILO, 2019). So, women have kaleidoscopic careers; operating relationally to others in both work and non-work realms and shifting the pattern of their careers by rotating different aspects of their lives (Mainiero and Sullivan, 2005). Women have shorter careers and lower career satisfaction, less career recognition and a more stressful path to advancement than men (Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017). Additionally, national values may impact women's careers (Hutchings, Metcalfe and Cooper, 2010). Despite some organizations having adopted workplace practices to support women employees (Clark *et al.*, 2017), women remain under-represented, especially in management positions; a situation mirrored, perhaps even more pronounced, amongst women expatriates.

#### *Women expatriates and careers*

Women remain under-represented amongst expatriates (Altman and Shortland, 2008, 2011; Hutchings and Michailova, 2017; Salamin and Hanappi, 2014; Shortland, 2009, 2014).<sup>3</sup> Adler (1984) found organizational selection prejudice to be the main reason. Johansson and Sliwa (2014) argued that race, ethnicity and socio-economic and cultural distance play a role; as do expatriates' characteristics (Shortland, 2009) and lack of organizational support and support networks (Varma and Russell, 2016). Women expatriates manage differently than men (Linehan, 2005), experience different challenges in foreign cultures (Mathur-Helm, 2002; Salamin and Davoine, 2015) and experience discrimination (Stalker and Mavin, 2011; Tung, 2008) and harassment (Bader *et al.*, 2018). Most research has examined Western women expatriates (Salamin and Hanappi, 2014) who are single (Selmer and Leung, 2003) or in dual-career couples, in which both people work in the overseas location (Mäkelä *et al.*, 2017), though even here women still do a 'second shift' in domestic work at home (Linehan and Walsh, 2000).

Moreover, women do not always fit the traditional career model for men, and may have

to choose between an international career and family. Although expatriation may enable women to combine their careers with motherhood (Shortland, 2014), women expatriates are less likely than men to receive support and developmental opportunities. When women work internationally, they tend to be successful, especially when they are well educated, have local language fluency and are motivated to achieve career success (Traavik and Richardson, 2010).

#### *Women SIEs and careers*

There has been limited research focusing specifically on women SIEs. Women may become SIEs primarily for personal reasons, such as interest in travel and cultural experiences, including specifically the appeal of the host country location (Fitzgerald and Howe-Walsh, 2008), with career being secondary (Harrison and Michailova, 2014; Thorn, 2009). Some women find the SIE experience transformational; resulting in personal development, changes in values, decreased emphasis on paid work and a simpler lifestyle (Myers, Inkson and Pringle, 2017).

Some research has focused on career aspects of the relocation of women SIEs, including restricted career opportunities and/or discrimination in their home countries, and greater opportunities for career development when working internationally (Tharenou, 2010; Tlaiss and Al Waqfi, 2020). Single and childless women may want to escape a current career and find a different path (Wechtler, 2018). Older women are well represented amongst SIEs and may engage in self-employment (Tharenou, 2010) and, in seeking liberation from mid-life issues, may find serendipitous career development and personal growth (Myers, Inkson and Pringle, 2017). While some find the SIE experience liberating, others find it constraining (Muir, Wallace and McMurray, 2014). Unlike AEs, women SIEs may experience less gender bias, be more entrepreneurial, rely on local networks to support their overall career development (Vance and McNulty, 2014) and see international experience as building career capital (Myers and Pringle, 2005). The differing motivations women SIEs have for relocating lead to generally less structured experiences and less correlation between the international jobs and overall career development (Harrison and Michailova, 2014).

<sup>3</sup>Although many studies of expatriates cover both men and women in their samples, the literature we refer to here specifically examines issues for women expatriates or makes direct gender comparisons a focus of their study.

## Methods

We used qualitative, semi-structured interview-based research to explore the career choices and trajectories of women expatriates in the UAE. Grounded theory was used for several reasons. First, it allows us to paint a comprehensive picture of dynamic social settings of the participants. Second, existing theory is extended and new theoretical explanations for observed phenomena provided (Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007, p. 30). Third, understanding how career trajectories of women SIEs evolve in the UAE is complex, and grounded theory enables teasing out nuances in the process of theory construction (Van Maanen, 1983, p. 9). Finally, grounded theory building provides for rigorous analysis and coding of concepts conveyed in interviews (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Grounded theory has frequently been used to study 'the social construction process' or 'the means by which organization members go about constructing and understanding their experience' (Gioia, Corley and Hamilton, 2013, p. 16). We invited working expatriate women to participate using a range of approaches, such as social media and 'snowballing' within professional and social networks. The women self-selected to participate, and all 51 interviewees were women SIEs. Thirty-two were married, 17 were single, three were divorced, one was a widow and one was engaged. Thirty of the women were nationals from a Western country, 15 were from an Asian country and six participants were from the Middle East and North African (MENA) region. The majority of our samples were in professional, managerial or senior managerial jobs. Twenty-five of the women were between 20 and 35 years old, 21 were between 36 and 50 and the remaining women were over 50. Tables 1ac provide a summary of each subsample.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews provided insights into the women SIEs' perspectives and experiences (Patton, 2002). Open-ended questions were developed from the literature on women's careers and women expatriates, tailored to the context of the UAE (Hutchings, Michailova and Harrison, 2013; Inkson *et al.*, 2012; Metcalfe, Hutchings and Cooper, 2009). We asked about reasons for relocation, employment in the UAE and future career plans: open questions were used to start a conversation in which women reflected on their career experience and their future. To ensure

methodological appropriateness (Edmondson and McManus, 2007), we developed grounded theory from interviews that allow for continuous narrative data (Charmaz, 2006). In determining whom to interview and when to stop sampling, we used grounded theory methods – theoretical sampling and saturation (Glaser and Strauss, 1967) – with data gathering guided by concepts emerging in our early interviews.

The interviews lasted 60–90 minutes and were recorded, with the consent of the participants. During the analysis, we decided to collect further data on the careers of the participating women to better elucidate their views on their career aspirations. After contacting all 51 women, we scheduled a second interview with nine of the original interviewees. Some of the women from the first wave of data collection had moved to another country, some had returned to their home country and some participants felt they had nothing further to add. The follow-up interviews were coded using the same approach as the first wave of interviews. Further, all the original interviews were re-examined to identify if other issues needed to be coded in relation to the women's views of their career trajectories progressing from their international work experiences.

We subdivided the data into three national groupings: women moving from Western countries (e.g. France, New Zealand, UK); women relocating from Asian countries (e.g. India, Pakistan, Philippines); and women moving from MENA countries (e.g. Jordan, Lebanon, Morocco).

### Data analysis

Data were initially analysed using grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1990); we then moved from open coding to axial coding and selective coding (Saldaña, 2013). We engaged in ongoing analysis and interpretation of the data to identify patterns and interrelationships between the phenomena of interest, using the constant comparative method to move iteratively between data and emergent theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Transcripts and notes were entered into NVivo 12, to create a codebook and assign codes, create memos to facilitate understanding of – and links between – codes in the data, keep track of code frequencies and examine excerpts related to particular codes. Because the women's career

Table 1a. Summary of Western sample

Respondent	Position	Location	Age	Nationality	Place of birth	Ethnic group	Marital status	Children	Education	Previous job and location	Year of joining this organization	Planning Follow-up to change current employment
Respondent 1	Operations Manager	Dubai	36–50	Romanian	Romania	Caucasian	Single	No	MBA	I worked as an engineer in Romania	2014	No
Respondent 2	Senior Learning and Development Consultant	Dubai	36–50	British	UK	Caucasian	Single	No	2 MBAs	I was working for another company and was contacted by this company. I came to the UAE many years ago. Worked in Abu Dhabi and move to Dubai later	2017	No
Respondent 3	Director, Trade Working Capital Corporate Banking	Dubai	36–50	Spanish	Brazil	Mixed	Married	Yes, 3	MBA	Was working in the banking sector for many years in different locations	2006	No
Respondent 4	Talent Acquisition Manager	Dubai	36–50	British	UK	Caucasian	Single	No	MA	I worked in the HR department of a large US firm in the UK	2017	Yes
Respondent 5	Event Manager	Dubai	20–35	German	Germany	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 3	Bachelor degree	My first real job was in a marketing agency in Germany	2014	Yes



Table 1a. (Continued)

Respondent	Position	Location	Age	Nationality	Place of birth	Ethnic group	Marital status	Children	Education	Previous job and location	Year of joining this organization	Planning Follow-up to change current view of employer
Respondent 6	Founder & Managing Director	Dubai	36–50	Italian	Italy	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 2	BBA	As a mother, I developed a particular interest in the environment and this is the reason why I established this company	2014	No
Respondent 7	Plates Trainer	Dubai	20–35	Russian	Russia	Caucasian	Married	No	BBA	I was a professional athlete in Russia	2015	No
Respondent 8	IT trade advisor	Dubai	20–35	French	France	Caucasian	Married	No	MBA	I worked for the French government	2016	No
Respondent 9	Sales Consultant Manager	Dubai	36–50	Italian	UK	Caucasian	Single	No	MBA	I have been in sales during my entire professional life	2016	No
Respondent 10	Vice President	Dubai	36–50	Spanish	Chile	Mixed	Married	Yes, 1	MBA	I worked as a senior environmental engineer in Spain	2008	No
Respondent 11	Teacher	Dubai	20–35	Finnish	Finland	Caucasian	Single	No	MBA	I completed my studies and moved to Dubai	2016	No
Respondent 12	Interior Designer	Dubai	36–50	British	UK	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 1	MBA	I worked as a designer in London	2017	No

Table 1a. (Continued)

Respondent	Position	Location	Age	Nationality	Place of birth	Ethnic group	Marital status	Children	Education	Previous job and location	Year of joining this organization	Planning Follow-up to change current em-employer view
Respondent 13	Managing Director	Dubai	20–35	Russian	Afghanistan	Mixed	Married	No	BBA	My first job was at the company in Abu Dhabi	2010	No No
Respondent 14	Communication Consultant	Dubai	20–35	German/French	Italy	Caucasian	Single	No	MBA	This is my first job	2015	No No
Respondent 15	Business Development Manager	Dubai	36–50	Brazilian	Brazil	Mixed	Married	No	MBA	I have been studying and living in multiple countries	2014	No No
Respondent 16	Head of Department	Dubai	36–50	American	USA	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 3	MBA	I worked as a marketing manager in Boston	2013	Yes No
Respondent 17	Assistant Professor	Abu Dhabi	50–65	Russian	Russia	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 2	DBA	I worked for a Swiss company in Beirut	2001	No No
Respondent 18	Electrical Engineer	Dubai	36–50	Spanish	Argentina	Mixed	Single	Yes, 1	BBA	I worked as an engineer in Barcelona	2017	No No
Respondent 19	Journalist	Dubai	36–50	Bulgarian	UK	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 2	MA	Worked as a part-timer and got a full-time job later	2011	No No
Respondent 20	Senior Consultant	Dubai	20–35	German	Netherlands	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 3	BBA	Was a teacher in Qatar	2011	No Yes
Respondent 21	Teacher	Sharjah	20–35	Australian	Australia	Mixed	Single	No	MA	This is my first job	2017	No No
Respondent 22	Trainer	Ras Al Khaimah	36–50	Greek	Greece	Caucasian	Married	Yes, 1	MA	Was working in an insurance company in Kuwait	2015	No No

Table 1a. (Continued)

Respondent	Position	Location	Age	Nationality	Place of birth	Ethnic group	Marital status	Children	Education	Previous job and location	Year of joining this organization	Planning Follow-up to change current employer
Respondent 23	Manager	Dubai	20–35	British	Pakistan	Asian	Married	Yes, 2	BBA	This is my first job	2014	No
Respondent 24	Assistant Manager	Dubai	36–50	Estonian	Estonia	Caucasian	Single	No	BBA	Was working in sales in Turkey	2014	No
Respondent 25	Senior Vice President	Dubai	36–50	New Zealander	New Zealand	Caucasian	Widow	Yes, 1	PhD	I worked in the logistic industry in the UK	2004	No
Respondent 26	Architect	Dubai	36–50	American	Kenya	Black/African	Married	Yes, 1	MA	Worked for a hotel chain	2015	No
Respondent 27	Senior Manager	Dubai	20–35	French	Algeria	Arab	Married	Yes, 3	MBA	This is my real first job	2009	No
Respondent 28	Manager VIP Services	Abu Dhabi	36–50	British	UK	Caucasian	Married	No	MBA	I was working for a British Airline in the UK	2015	No
Respondent 29	Sales Representative	Dubai	20–35	Ukrainian	Ukraine	Caucasian	Engaged	Not yet	MA	Had a part-time job. Was lucky to get this job	2015	Yes
Respondent 30	Regional Training Manager	Dubai	36–50	French	Lebanon	Arab	Married	Yes, 4	BBA	I was working in the cosmetic industry in France	2014	No

Table 1b. Summary of Asian sample

Respondent	Position	Location	Age	Nationality	Place of birth	Ethnic group	Marital status	Children	Education	Previous job and location	Year of joining the organization	Planning to change current employer	Follow-up interview
Respondent 1	Associate Consultant & Counsel	Dubai	36–50	India	India	Asian	Married	Yes, 4	LLC	Worked as a lawyer in India	2014	Why not. I would not say no for a better offer	No
Respondent 2	Director of Confucius Institute	Dubai	36–50	Chinese	China	Asian	Single	Yes, 1	PhD	I was a professor at a university in China	2016	No	No
Respondent 3	Tutor	Ajman	20–35	Indian	UAE	Asian	Married	No	MA	Was born in the UAE	2017	Yes, if there is a better job	No
Respondent 4	Restaurant Owner	Dubai	51–65	Taiwanese	Taiwan	Asian	Married	Yes, 1	BBA	Was working in a retail store in Taiwan	2007	No	Yes
Respondent 5	Consultant Manager	Dubai	20–35	Uzbek	Uzbekistan	Mixed	Single	No	BBA	I worked as a consultant in Uzbekistan	2011	Always open to new challenges	No
Respondent 6	Construction Consultant	Dubai	20–35	Kazakh	Kazakhstan	Mixed	Divorced	Yes, 1	MBA	Completed my studies and moved to the UAE	2016	No	No
Respondent 7	Interior Designer	Dubai	20–35	Pakistani	UAE	Asian	Single	No	BBA	Worked in sales in the UAE	2017	No	No
Respondent 8	Project Manager	Dubai	20–35	Taiwanese	Taiwan	Asian	Single	No	BBA	This is my first job	2014	No	Yes
Respondent 9	Director	Dubai	51–65	Indian	India	Asian	Married	Yes, 2	PhD	I was a trainer in an education institution in the UAE	2014	I would not say no, but the market is difficult	No

Table 1b. (Continued)

Respondent	Position	Location	Age	Nationality	Place of birth	Ethnic group	Marital status	Children	Education	Previous job and location	Year of joining the organization	Planning to change current employer	Follow-up interview
Respondent 10	Training Manager	Dubai	36–50	Pakistani	Pakistan	Asian	Married	Yes, 3	MBA	I completed my studies and started my first job	2008	No	No
Respondent 11	Accountant	Sharjah	36–50	Indian	India	Asian	Married	Yes, 2	BBA	I didn't work in India	1999	Maybe. If a new offer comes up	No
Respondent 12	Assistant	Abu Dhabi	20–35	Indian	India	Asian	Married	Yes, 2	High school diploma	I didn't work in India	2008	Yes, waiting for something new	No
Respondent 13	Translator	Dubai	51–65	Korean	South Korea	Asian	Married	Yes, 1	BBA	Self-employed in South Korea	2006	No	Yes
Respondent 14	Sales Representative	Dubai	20–35	Filipina	Philippines	Asian	Divorced	Yes, 2	Secondary school degree	I was working on a farm in the Philippines	2012	I would not say no to a better offer	No

Table 1b. (Continued)

Respondent	Position	Location	Age	Nationality	Place of birth	Ethnic group	Marital status	Children	Education	Previous job and location	Year of joining the organization	Planning to change current employer	Follow-up interview
Respondent 15	Sales Representative	Dubai	20–35	Filipina	Philippines	Asian	Married	Yes, 3	BBA	I have a degree in accounting, but could not find any good job in the Philip-pines	2014	If there is a better offer	No
Respondent 16	Nurse		20–35	Filipina	Philippines	Asian	Divorced	Yes, 1	BBA	I applied to a recruitment agency. I paid an application fee and they orga-nized my job	2015	I wish, but this is too compli-cated. I don't want to end up without any job	

Table 1c. Summary of MENA sample

Respondent	Position	Location	Age	Nationality	Place of birth	Ethnic group	Marital status	Children	Education	Previous job and location	Year of joining the organization	Planning to change current employer	Follow-up interview
Respondent 1	Front Desk Manager	Dubai	36–50	Lebanese	Lebanon	Arab	Married	No	Secondary school diploma	Worked in a hotel in Lebanon	2004	Probably	No
Respondent 2	Regional Manager	Dubai	20–35	Jordanian	Jordan	Arab	Married	No	BBA	This is my first job	2015	No, I am very blessed with my current employer	No
Respondent 3	Manager	Dubai	36–50	Moroccan	Morocco	Arab	Single	No	BBA	Moved to Dubai for my first job	1996	Yes, at any time	No
Respondent 4	Teller	Sharjah	20–35	Egyptian	UAE	Arab	Single	No	BBA	This is my first job	2016	Yes	No
Respondent 5	Consultant Manager	Dubai	20–35	Iranian	Iran	Asian	Married	Yes, 1	BBA	I did not work in Iran	2010	In general yes, but I can't go anywhere. Because of my citizenship I would not pass the security check	No
Respondent 6	Project Manager	Abu Dhabi	20–35	Omani	Oman	Arab	Married	Yes, 3	MBA	I worked in the oil and gas industry in UAE	since 2014	Yes, if there is a better opportunity	No

experiences were referred to in response to many questions, line-by-line coding was employed in order to provide detailed insights (Charmaz, 2006). We began by interpreting each woman's views and experiences, and then aggregated those experiences to the national cultural subsamples. This allowed for comparisons both within national groupings as well as across groups.

Our analyses followed three steps. First, the lead author and a trained research assistant divided the transcripts and coded them using the logic of open coding, 'the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing, and categorizing data' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 61). The two coders initially coded 10 transcripts each, and then met to develop a preliminary code frame, which was continuously refined thereafter. Codes were derived inductively from the transcripts, discussed and agreed upon by the coders to generate multiple perspectives and alleviate researcher bias. Second, axial coding was used 'as an intermediate step to create relationships between categories' (Strauss and Corbin, 1990, p. 96). More specifically, we aggregated raw codes and looked for relationships between them. As a final step, we engaged in selective coding to identify wider dimensions and themes that would form our emergent theoretical structure (Strauss and Corbin, 1990).

Throughout this multi-step process, we moved iteratively back and forth between data and theory. At each step, results were discussed among the authors to enable joint interpretation and ensure analytical trustworthiness (Pratt, Kaplan and Whittington, 2020; Harrison and Rouse, 2014; Lincoln and Guba, 1990). We coded until we reached the theoretical saturation stage in which no new codes or insights emerged from the data (Corbin and Strauss, 1990). Table 2 presents the coding process.

## Findings

We present our findings according to the four main themes emerging from the data (reasons to relocate, reasons for employment/being selected, importance of the UAE to career and future aspirations/plans). The findings demonstrate how national and individual factors shape women's career choices and trajectories over time. Figure 1 summarizes our findings. In respect to reasons for expatriation/relocation, Western women highlighted career opportunities and adventure, and

following their husband's career decisions, whereas women in the MENA sample referred to lifestyle considerations and women in the Asian and MENA samples referred to financial incentives and choices, reflecting a focus on the family broadly (e.g. supporting extended family members). Furthermore, for single women from the MENA region our data show that greater flexibility and personal freedom is an important factor influencing their international relocation.

Concerning their current employment in the UAE and how it links to their prior employment, a few of the Western women had not worked previously, for family reasons, but most were educated and had previously worked in the same field as currently, whereas a significant number of the women from Asia and MENA, though educated, had not previously worked, for cultural reasons. The Western women highlighted being selected for employment in the UAE based on their nationality (e.g. a preference to employ Western women), while Asian women referred to being selected because of perceptions that they would accept lower pay/salaries, and women from the MENA region highlighted the value of cultural proximity and, for some, Arabic language skills. All three national sample groups believed their future careers would be affected by individual factors in their family, with Western women focusing on husbands and Asian and MENA women focusing on extended family. Western single women are most flexible about employment changes and planning a career path. The women in the Asian and MENA group are open to the idea of changing employment, but are passive about their careers. The women in the Asian group feel they are limited by financial commitments to family, and the women in the MENA group feel they have improved their career prospects by working in the UAE. In the following section we provide more detail on the differences across the national subsamples and highlight some variations in the views and experiences of married women compared to single women.

### *Reason to relocate*

The women gave different reasons for their international move, with some reflecting deliberate choices and others being the result of life stage and happenstance. Whilst some differences across the three national subsamples became apparent, our findings also show overlapping views. For married



Table 2. Qualitative coding process

First-order code	Sample quotes	Second-order code	Themes
Self-independence	I decided to come by myself because the UAE experience seemed to be challenging and I wanted to be independent. I knew, as long as I stay close to my parents, I would never become completely independent. For me the UAE was important as a sort of personal growth. (Respondent 14, Western sample)	Identity/adventure	<b>Reasons for relocation</b>
Personal growth/freedom	I was fascinated by the MENA world but never had the chance to experience it. In addition to the professional challenges, the UAE was good to discover the MENA world. I even learnt 'MENA'. (Respondent 25, Western sample) The UAE is more open and flexible. Here, I can basically do what I want as I am not under the constant watch of the family. (Respondent 3, MENA sample)		
Husband's job	My husband got a job in Dubai. There was no doubt that I would follow him. (Respondent 3, MENA sample)	Family	
Marriage	I got married to my husband who lived here. So, I came after my marriage. (Respondent 13, Asian sample)		
Lack of job in the home country	I have two children, a mother and a sister who need my help. I decided to come to the UAE for a job and more money. (Respondent 16, Asian sample)	Opportunity	
Dubai	Weather is fantastic. Very good salary. Dubai is a cosmopolitan city in which you can feel comfortable from day one. (Respondent 7, Western sample)		
Poor economic situation in the home country	The economic situation in Romania is bad. I decided to come to the UAE for better earnings and job opportunities. (Respondent 1, Western sample)		
Previous job	I have worked in the banking sector for many years. So, there is no surprise that I got this job in Dubai. (Respondent 3, Western sample)	Professionally qualified	<b>Reasons for employment</b>
Work-related experiences	I have experiences in the field of port management which are relevant to this job and organization. (Respondent 25, Western sample)		
No previous working experiences	I did not work back home. As a wife with a husband who earns enough money, I was not supposed to work. I think this is a cultural thing, a symbol of wealth or something. Like, see my wife doesn't need to work. However, once I start working my boss and husband were impressed by my dedication and hard work. (Respondent 12, Asian sample)	Attitude towards work	
Not asking for much	I am in fact overqualified and speak English. More importantly, we are known for not asking for high salaries and are happy with little things. (Respondent 15, Asian sample)		
Personality	I am passionate about my job and developed a high level of resilience over time. Life taught me a few lessons which formed me as a person and made me more confident. (Respondent 4, MENA sample)		
Language	I am bilingual and studied finance and banking which is useful to my current job. (Respondent 4, MENA sample)	Adequate personal and educational background	
Education	I assume that my educational background and the fact that I am from a Western country was helpful to get a job. (Respondent 20, Western sample)		

Table 2. (Continued)

First-order code	Sample quotes	Second-order code	Themes
Familiarity with local language and culture	In addition to my solid education I have the advantage to speak the local language and I am familiar with the MENA culture. (Respondent 5, MENA sample)	International exposure	<b>UAE as part of overall career Next career step</b>
International dimension	I think it's important, because the UAE provides an international platform which can be of help for future career. I am not sure yet what the next move would be, but the experiences I am gaining can be beneficial. (Respondent 7, Western sample)		
Diversity	This experience is very different than what I had before. This level of diversity helps you to understand cultural differences. (Respondent 22, Western sample)		
Equal chances	Every beginning is challenging. I had to work very hard to get where I am, but once the management noticed that I can work and achieve better results than my male colleagues, they started to invite me to important meetings and events. I don't want to move somewhere else and start all over again. (Respondent 17, Western sample)		
Career less relevant	As an expatriate, you live in your own bubble. The reason why I am here is to work and save money not to make friends. (Respondent 6, Asian sample)	Financial incentives	
Attractive compensation packages	The experience in Dubai is definitely a plus to my career but this is not the first priority on my agenda. I am here to make money. (Respondent 1, MENA sample)		
Better future	We earn here more money than back home and can build a better future for the children. (Respondent 13, Asian sample)		
Self-discovery	Absolutely. Dubai is an amazing place to discover your potential. You are often pushed to your limits. (Respondent 21, Western sample)	Vibrant working environment	
Dubai as a role model	Dubai is a role model in the entire MENA world and has shown the world what an Arab city can achieve. Working experiences in Dubai will be helpful to get a job anywhere in the region. (Respondent 6, MENA sample)		
Lifestyle	The place is interesting and offers an amazing lifestyle. (Respondent 11, Western sample)	Support	
Family	I came to Dubai and found new friends. Work is often stressful, but my manager is very supportive and helpful. I learnt a lot from him. In fact, he is the major reason for my personal and professional growth. (Respondent 5, Asian sample)		
Management	My next step would be a role in the management team. My boss is very supportive and open. He has no problems with women in management positions. (Respondent 8, Western sample)		
Planned next move	Dubai is the regional hub for my employer. Therefore, it is an important office and your experience here is a condition to pursue a career in the head office in Paris. (Respondent 1, MENA sample)	Springboard	
Optimism	The experience in the emerging market is very interesting. I believe once you lived and worked in Dubai, you can make it anywhere. (Respondent 6, MENA sample)		
Social hierarchy	I don't mind moving to a better job. However, it is more difficult for us to switch jobs than European managers. (Respondent 13, Asian sample)	Succession plan	

Table 2. (Continued)

First-order code	Sample quotes	Second-order code	Themes
Family	My next step would be a role in the management team. However, it all depends on my husband's next move. If he moves to another country, I will be moving with him. (Respondent 8, Western sample)		
New opportunities	We will see. I am open and flexible to new opportunities. (Respondent 5, MENA sample)		
Passive observer	This job is ok, but I would not say no if somebody would offer me a better job. (Respondent 10, Asian sample)	Intention to change employer	
Barrier to make the next move	In general, yes, but I can't go anywhere. Because of my citizenship I won't pass the security check. (Respondent 6, MENA sample)		
Happy with current job	I think I am blessed with my current job. No moves are planned so far. (Respondent 3, MENA sample)		

women, the career choices of their husbands were the main reason for relocation, and for married and single women from Asia and MENA, commitments to extended family were also a factor. Career and adventure are more important for single Western women. As an example, one single woman from the Western sample commented:

I wanted to explore the world. I haven't seen much of it. I heard about Dubai and saw the pictures of the amazing buildings and shopping malls. For some reasons, I felt a deep connection with the city though I didn't know much about it. It was a kind of falling in love with this place. I started to search for jobs. After a while I found the website which helps British teachers to relocate. I got in touch and got my first job offer soon after making the first contact. Moving to Dubai is much more for me than just getting a job. I found myself. Every day I discover something new about me. This is an incredible journey. The job is a nice side-effect of this personal journey. (Respondent 2, Western sample)

Unlike Western single women, single women from Asia and the MENA region more often mentioned financial pressures and the difficult employment market at home as main reasons to relocate. One single woman reported:

I did not get married after graduating from school. In my culture, you need to get married as soon as possible. The chances of getting married are reduced the older you get. Once I reached my 25th birthday, I knew that marriage will probably not be an option for me. My brothers got married and I was left home with my parents. I knew my parents will need my fi-

nancial support. I didn't want to sit home and wait for a prince to come and save me, so I convinced my family to allow me to move to Dubai. I think the financial arguments were the most convincing ones. I came to Dubai because of its reputation as a 'New York' of the Middle East and the good salaries. The first years were really challenging. However, I managed my work and myself. I'm still not married, but I can help my parents and save money for my own future. I may not need a husband anymore .... (Respondent 3, MENA sample)

In summary, whilst married women across the national subsamples share similar reasons for relocating to the UAE, the motives of single women differ significantly across the national subsamples. While single women from Western countries search for adventure in a foreign country, single women from the MENA region hope to escape from discrimination and low agency in their home countries.

#### *Reasons for employment and being selected*

In contrast to the varying findings between married and single women in motives for relocation, both marital status groups mentioned experience and educational background as important for being recruited and selected by an organization in the UAE. However, differences appear between the three national subsamples. For example, while Western women mentioned the value of previous work experience for gaining a job in the UAE, many women from Asia and the MENA region came to the UAE without any previous work experience.

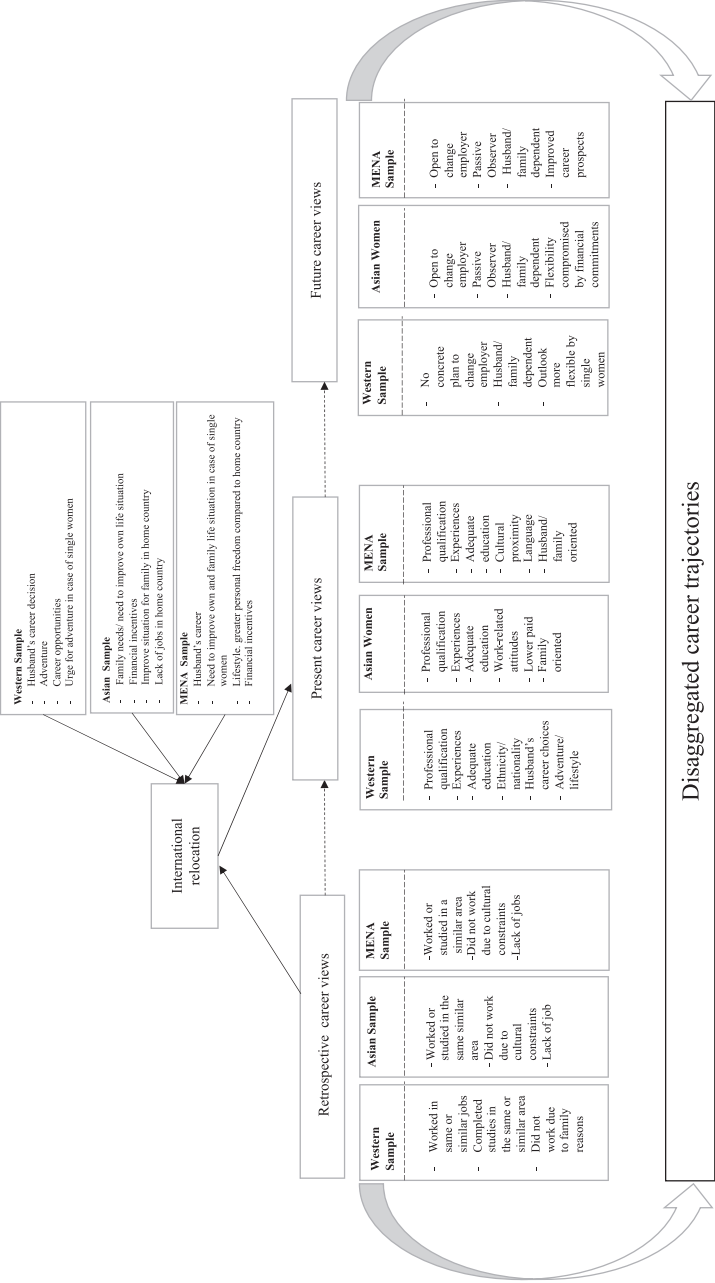


Figure 1. Disaggregated career trajectories

rience (because of their cultural background), so the move reflected a life-stage change. For example, one woman from an Asian country commented:

I was still a student when I got married. My husband and his family had to promise my father that they will allow me to complete my studies. After marriage, I graduated from university as the top of my class, but the deal with my father was over. My mother-in-law is a very conservative person and asked me to stay home and look after the house and my family. In our culture, only the wives of poor people work ... even female Bollywood stars reduce or stop acting after marriage. Their career is somehow over with marriage. The idea of staying home under the watch of my in-laws depressed and frustrated me, but there was not much I could do. The responsibility for me and my well-being was shifted to my husband and his family. I knew my husband was a more liberal man, but he would never get in argument with his mother. Time went by and my husband decided to move to Dubai for better job opportunities and higher salaries. Once we settled down, I started to wonder how I could convince him to allow me to work. Finally, I succeeded. The second income was the major reason. The move was so important for me and my career. I enjoy my work and hope we are going to stay forever in the UAE. (Respondent 9, Asian sample)

Further, the findings show that women from the MENA region who speak Arabic and know the local culture have an advantage over women from MENA countries who do not speak Arabic, or women from Asian countries:

One of the reasons why I got this job is because I am bi-lingual. Although English is common, the official language in the UAE remains Arabic. The main language of the government sector is still Arabic. The Arabic language becomes particularly important if you work in administrative roles and interact with government agencies. It is at least a small advantage. However, we are not paid more for speaking Arabic or knowing the local culture. We are somehow kept like a sandwich between the Western expatriates and people from Pakistan or Philippines. In my case, I got the job, but it will be extremely difficult to move upwards. I will never win the race against a local or a Western expatriate. (Respondent 2, MENA sample)

Reference to other groups of expatriates and local employees was made by several interviewees. Whilst the UAE Labour Law, Article 9 clarifies 'Work is an inherent right of the Nationals of

the United Arab Emirates', Article 10 stipulates 'Where National workers are not available, preference in employment shall be given (1) to Workers of other Arab nationalities, and (2) to Workers of other nationalities'. Given the inherent rights of the nationals and their powerful networks (*wasta*), expatriates do not compete with them for the same jobs (UAE Federal Labour Law, 1980).

Employment preferences partially follow the Federal Labour Law. Our data confirm that a Western appearance is helpful for getting a job. As expatriates from Asia and the MENA region often compete for the same jobs, the ability to speak Arabic might be a competitive advantage. As indicated by some participants, companies often employ women from Asian countries as they work hard and do not expect/ask for high salaries.

#### *UAE and overall career*

The women characterized their experiences in the UAE as relevant to their overall career and as important. However, this was not manifested in concrete career plans and, for some, reflected their careers commencing once they moved to the UAE and thus there was an element of happenstance and changing life stage resulting from the move (usually husband/family reasons). Across the national subsamples, the women reported that they enjoyed expatriation. In particular, Western women reported equal and fair employment in the UAE (despite our preceding reflection on labour law giving employment preference based on nationality). As one participant commented:

Every beginning is challenging, but hard work pays off. When I started working, it was quite challenging to convince my male colleagues and boss. The gender issues in UAE are no different from anywhere else in the world. The media likes to pick up on those issues because they happen in a Muslim country. In my personal case, I have never experienced gender discrimination. Once the management noticed that I can work and achieve better results than my male colleagues, they started to invite me to important meetings and events. I think women often hide behind the discrimination claims as this is an easy way to blame the men or the system. I have a wonderful time here in Dubai. (Respondent 1, Western sample)

In general, interviewees understood the advantage of career advancement resulting from domestic or regional moves. Some women from

the MENA region described their experiences in the UAE as critical to their overall career. That is, finding suitable employment elsewhere in the region would be easier having had the Dubai experience. Additionally, for some, attractive compensation packages outweigh the importance of career growth. A woman from an Asian country explained:

I don't understand the whole career fuss. In my country, you are successful if you are making enough money to have a good life. I have a college degree in accounting but decided to come to the UAE and work as an assistant because of the better salary. I have responsibilities towards my family. We need my salary. A career as an accountant in the Philippines won't help as much as the salary I am getting here. I think this career thing is more relevant to Western countries. They don't have the same problems as we have. We are poor people and most of our challenges are of a financial nature. (Respondent 15, Asian sample)

Our data show that expatriation to the UAE is generally a positive experience, but career implications are either limited, irrelevant or unknown. Again, a comparison across the three national subsamples shows how individual factors, such as family commitments, shape overall career prospects for women expatriates.

#### *Next career step*

With respect to future career prospects, we noticed similar views of married women across the national subsamples. The future career decisions of married women are directly attached to the career choices of their husband. Married women expatriates are willing to give up their career in the UAE for the benefit of their husband or families; thus, again, career choices and trajectories reflect life stages. One woman commented:

I like the traditional image of a family. I am a modern woman with my own voice, but when it comes to family, I am rather from the old school. Luckily, my husband values similar principles. In terms of my career, I think it makes sense to prioritize one career in a relationship. We have friends who pursue a dual career. It is stressful and a source of frequent conflicts. In our marriage, we decided to focus on my husband's career. My role is to look after the family and the house. In the UAE, I can work and look after

the house and family as we have domestic help. However, should my husband's career take us back home or to another city or country, I don't mind quitting. (Respondent 19, Western sample)

The central role of their husband's career raises some fundamental questions about agency and self-determination amongst these women. Despite some overlapping views, our findings suggest differences across the national subsamples. In particular, single women from the MENA region mentioned the springboard function of Dubai and have concrete plans to utilize this experience for their future career plans:

I don't want to go back home. I am not the same person anymore. Being on my own in a foreign country has shaped me. I worked hard and fought endless battles to reach this level of independence. I can't just return to my family home. I love my family, but I could not live with them again. To me, my next move is not only a personal achievement, it is also a justification for my family. Otherwise they will ask me to come back. My plan is to work hard and wait for the right opportunity. Preferably, I would love to move to France. That's the dream and the plan. (Respondent 5, Asian sample)

Our findings show diversity around whether the women plan to change their employer. Whilst most of the Western women plan to maintain their current employment, women from Asia and the MENA region are more flexible and open to new jobs, even if they are not actively looking for them: suggesting happenstance is an important aspect of their careers. One Asian woman explained:

In my country, we are used to be 'decent' and not to ask too often or for too much. To show restraint is a fundamental value in our culture. Girls, in particular, are trained from early childhood to behave decently. Looking actively for a job contradicts these values. We are supposed to be grateful for the job we have. And, I am not confident enough for the employment market. Once I get a job, I try to keep it as long as possible. However, if someone would be offering me a new job, I would definitely think about it. (Respondent 4, MENA sample)

The participants across the three national subsamples share some common views and experiences in terms of their next career move. However, specific differences were highlighted that are

directly related to either or both individual and cultural factors.

## Discussion

Makkonen (2015) argued that SIEs are not a homogenous group and our findings show that expatriate women have diverse origins and occupations, as well as reasons to relocate – and hence differing career choices and trajectories. Extant research on SIE women has highlighted that women self-initiated expatriation primarily for adventure or self-development (Harrison and Michailova, 2014; Myers, Inkson and Pringle, 2017; Thorn, 2009) or career considerations (Myers and Pringle, 2005; Tharenou, 2010; Vance and McNulty, 2014; Wechtler, 2018). Whilst we found these aspects in our study, we provide a more nuanced examination of women SIEs, highlighting variations in the women's career choices and trajectories as affected by national cultural factors, as well as individual factors such as marital status; with the latter, in some cases, also relating to national background.

Extant research has said that push–pull factors for women to become SIEs include restricted career opportunities and/or discrimination in their home countries, and greater opportunities for career development when they move to work internationally (Tharenou, 2010). We extend this by highlighting that, for women from Asian and MENA countries, who had not worked in their home countries despite qualifications, a move to another country can provide them with an opportunity to develop careers away from cultural pressures not to work. In contrast to previous research highlighting Arab women's role and career development as being affected by wearing traditional clothing (Omair, 2009), the participants in our study, whilst mentioning that the appearance of being Western or Asian had an impact on career opportunities, did not associate career progress with any appearance related to wearing traditional clothing. We believe that our findings have to be seen in the light of the culturally open and tolerant environment of the UAE, which attracted a number of women SIEs. For the Asian and MENA women, the location's attractiveness was because of financial remuneration: for Asian women it also offers lifestyle, and for MENA women it can provide a stepping stone for careers in the region. Thus, our findings

add to the extant literature by suggesting that local conditions act as pull factors for women SIEs.

We extend earlier research by identifying how women's international careers differ according to national background and individual factors like marital status/family commitments, but we also highlight how current international experience is viewed as part of a longer-term trajectory. Women SIEs generally have less structured experiences and less correlation between their international jobs and overall career development (Harrison and Michailova, 2012, 2014). Although there is no competition between UAE nationals and expatriates (Haak-Saheem and Festing, 2018), employment preference is given to UAE nationals first and then Western expatriates. Asian women may undertake work not wanted by women from Western or MENA countries, and will accept lower pay. Despite these employment constraints, across all national groupings, women were very positive about their current work, even though most did not have career trajectories that followed an established path, and many did not have definite career plans. Changes tended to result from different life stages, and happenstance plays a significant role in their career decisions. All these women are open and flexible concerning their career decisions, but women from Asia and MENA were more passive about planning a career and seeing their current work as part of an overall career trajectory.

While the career trajectories of married women are mainly influenced by career decisions and the location of their husbands (for Western women), or family commitments more broadly (for Asian and MENA women), single-women SIEs, particularly from Western countries, ascribe more value to the adventure and challenges of an international career. The experiences of living and working in a foreign country satisfy the need for self-dependency and exposure to a new challenge. In this life stage, Western women intend to explore their own limits and may take an overseas experience to seek out adventure at any age rather than the traditional 'gap year' associated with early adulthood. Single women from the MENA sample associate a greater level of personal freedom with working in the UAE, as the geographical distance reduces control by family. Rodriguez and Scurry (2019) showed that expatriate women enjoy more freedom and flexibility than local women in Qatar (Middle East), and foreignness is an advantage as expatriate women do not need

to behave according to the conservative cultural values of the host country. Even though MENA women from countries outside the UAE are not viewed as being so foreign in the same way as Western women, our study shows an element of freedom for MENA women. However, single Western women may move country in search of adventure and make career choices at different ages, whereas such opportunities may not be as available to MENA women across their life stages.

The women SIEs in our study fit comfortably with Makkonen's (2016) employability maintenance approach to career self-management (many had jobs to maintain their marketability). We extend this by suggesting that, for many, these jobs are part of careers including family breaks, or are related to family relocations, or were in preparation for another career move (especially within the MENA region) – aligning with research on women's careers generally, as affected by contextual factors and family considerations (Greenhaus and Beutell, 1985; Kossek, Su and Wu, 2017). There was some limited evidence of the boundaryless career concept being suited to expatriate careers (Andresen, Biemann and Pattie, 2015; Stahl, Miller and Tung, 2002), but in terms of career anchors (Schein, 1996), family took precedence over any external careers. These women were engaged with work, and some women evidenced an interest in career success (Traavik and Richardson, 2010), but few specifically referenced building career capital (Myers and Pringle, 2005) and there was limited focus on future careers. For most of these women, career decisions are based on 'happenstance' (Krumboltz, 2009) – independent and disconnected decisions based on the situation they find themselves in, rather than a planned career path.

We examined these differences amongst women SIEs through the influence of time, past experiences and future expectations, and this helps to explain how and why individuals view and plan their career choices and career trajectories. Careers research has largely overlooked the influence of temporal influences, past life-changing experiences and future career outlooks in explaining how and what shapes the career trajectories of women expatriates. Our findings resonate with the theory that careers develop in accordance with life stages (Pringle and McCulloch Dixon, 2003) rather than as a linear progression (Levinson, 1996). These women SIEs view their careers in the context of

time and space, and have a kaleidoscopic career approach (Maniero and Sullivan, 2005), seeing their career trajectories as temporally situated in concert with their personal and professional work environment. Most of these women SIEs value their work, but do not locate it within a career trajectory. Figure 1 summarizes the disaggregated career trajectories of women SIEs.

## Implications, limitations and issues for future research and conclusions

### *Practical implications*

Though our focus in this paper has been on women SIEs' own views of their career trajectories, the findings have important implications for organizations and human resource managers who want to employ expatriate women with diverse personal circumstances, national origins and occupations. Organizations need to provide better support to retain women, while they balance the demands of work and family through kaleidoscopic and happenstance careers and, in particular, organizations should recognize the need for different support for women based on national groupings and marital status. Given the interest in, but passivity about, careers we found amongst the MENA and Asian samples, organizations have a role to play in communicating equal opportunities for advancement and developing these women's careers. The Western women, who were career-flexible but seeking challenges, could have valuable roles in mentoring women from other national groupings, assisting those women's career advancement and contributing to their own intercultural learning. As single women are more driven to expatriate for adventure and challenge, while married women's choices to expatriate and stay are affected by husband/family considerations, organizations need to support these women in different ways; that is, married women may require financial assistance with and/or access to child rearing/other caring support, while single women may require referral to networks of other single expatriates as a support base to assist their adjustment to living alone internationally. Whilst it can be debated whether these are organizational or individual responsibilities, given a shift to boundaryless careers and self-initiated expatriation, organizations supporting women through varying life stages to achieve work/life balance and adjust to living



internationally are more likely to retain talent and contribute more broadly to the global talent pool by working with women to develop their skills and abilities through their kaleidoscopic careers.

As we found that women's international careers differ according to personal growth aspirations, and to individual factors like marital status and family commitments, and these factors may be part of a longer-term trajectory, we encourage managers and organizations to consider whether women who self-initiate expatriation may require different support than traditional assignees. We found that an important factor motivating some of these SIE women to expatriate/stay in the UAE was lifestyle and income. The same may apply for other contexts offering similar benefits (e.g. Hong Kong, Singapore); but in other parts of the world (e.g. Europe/North America/Australia), where the income-earning capacity is a lesser reason to relocate/stay, women may be more career-focused.

#### *Limitations and issues for future research*

We collected data from more participants than is usual across qualitative research and the sample size, especially for SIE women, reached 'saturation' (e.g. Marshall, 1996) across the dataset, as well as within each national subsample. We covered more countries of origin than is typical in qualitative studies in this field, however, some of our findings may not be generalizable beyond these country groupings. Further, many participants mentioned moving to/staying in the UAE for lifestyle/money reasons – and salaries are high in comparison to most other countries and tax is low (sales tax is 5% and there is no income tax). So, expatriates in other countries may have greater focus on their career development.

In our analysis we focused on the nationalities of the women (within national groupings), except where the women themselves made reference to aspects of their ethnicity. We recognize that there is great cultural diversity across the countries in the groupings we studied and, moreover, within many of the nations from which the women expatriated there is significant ethnic diversity, including religion and language. Future research might benefit from studying the role of religion and clothing (and how it affects identity and gender roles) (Omair, 2009; Sidani, 2005) within the context of women SIE's careers in the Gulf countries. Ethnicity and class could impact on women's work roles,

work–family relationships and opportunities to expatriate. Thus, future research might explore differences within ethnicity and class, rather than just nationality, for women's self-initiated expatriation.

Our findings, with most emphasis on family, financial and lifestyle considerations above career development, may reflect the financial opportunities of the location. The women in this study did not refer directly to constraints on their work due to household/caring responsibilities, which has been emphasized in earlier research as affecting women's international careers (Linehan and Walsh, 2000). It may be that one aspect of the lifestyle of working in the context we studied (particularly for Western women) was the affordability of domestic labour, meaning that these women did not have to make the choice between family and an international career. Our findings concur with earlier research suggesting that expatriate women do not follow traditional male career paths (Linehan and Walsh, 2001). The almost total absence of career forward planning is noteworthy, and adds to extant research. Future research might compare the experiences of women SIEs in other countries in the world that pay high salaries to see if that affects career attitudes and plans. It might be worthwhile to study the career trajectories of women who commence an expatriate career due to family reasons. Future scholarship might benefit from longitudinal studies and alternative methods (e.g. ethnographic approach).

Finally, despite contacting all the participants who had done a first interview, we only gained a second interview with six Western and three Asian women SIEs. We were unable to reach the women from the MENA countries, or they were unavailable for a second interview. Hence, some of the career-focused findings may reflect the views of the second participants rather than the perceptions and experiences of the entire sample.

## **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to unveil the career choices and trajectories of women SIEs from a wide range of countries in a less studied environment. Our findings emphasize the temporal and situational character of the career decisions of women SIEs. We contribute theoretically to the extant (self-initiated) expatriate literature in suggesting that, in addition to host country

context, women's own demographic characteristics, namely their national cultural background and relationship status (married/single), affects their careers. In providing a model of disaggregated career trajectories through retrospective, present and future career views, we identified how women SIEs' careers are affected by situational life stages and happenstance, and offer valuable insights into the national cultural and individual embeddedness of career choices and trajectories of women SIEs.

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